DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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DEATH IS A HIGHWAY

The world's population of Florida Key deer was only 50 in 1947—and in the first 10 months of 1971, 52 were killed on a highway.

These apparently contradictory statistics are part of the story about this tiny whitetail that has been rescued from extinction by conservationists and the Department of the Interior--only to be victimized by automobiles.

The population of this subspecies is about 700 today in the Florida Keys, a far cry from the 1947 total. But cars, trucks and buses on the highway and the feeder roads in the area have killed 590 in this 24-year period.

"The situation is a bit ironic," said Nathaniel P. Reed, Assistant Secretary of the Interior for Fish and Wildlife and Parks. "Maybe the Key deer symbolize our whole endangered species situation. They might even symbolize our human situation."

"Home" is the National Key Deer Refuge on Big Pine Key in southern Florida, administered by Interior's Fish and Wildlife Service. And the highway is U.S. Route One to Key West.

Thanks to highway signs along the route and the feeder roads, cautioning motorists about deer crossings, drivers have responded by reducing speeds, but the collisions continue in broad daylight—many at speeds less than 35 miles an hour.

Jack Watson, manager of Key Deer Refuge, says this is because "neither drivers nor deer know how to react when near each other."

He and South Florida conservationists are trying to teach motorists to expect the unexpected when sighting deer along the roads.

Deer-proof fencing has been ruled out because of the length of Route One and its feeder roads. Deer are entited onto the roadways by good browse along the roadsides.

Destruction of habitat by developers and illegal shooting had almost wiped out the Florida Key deer population when the refuge was established in 1954. Then Big Pine Key was set up as a permanent sanctuary. The little whitetails responded with rapid herd development.

The Key provides excellent browse on a thin covering of soil over limestone formations, with many natural pockets that hold rainwater for long periods, enabling the herd to survive during periods of drought.

The Key deer is conspicuously smaller than its mainland relatives, measuring about 38 inches from nose to tail and 26 to 32 inches tall at the shoulders. Adult bucks weigh 60 to 95 pounds and are aggressively territorial, driving intruders or competitors into other areas. Does weigh 35 to 65 pounds. Rutting is from October through December, with fawns born in April and May. Bucks shed antlers during March and April.

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